She's a Queen and a Boss: Examining the Representation of *Empire*'s Cookie Lyon from a Black Feminist Perspective

A Thesis submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Communication Arts

in the Department of Communication Arts
of the College of the Arts

July 2018

Danyelle Gary

Valdosta State University

This thesis, "She's a Queen and a Boss: Examining the Representation of *Empire*'s Cook Lyon from a Black Feminist Perspective," by Danyelle Gary, is approved by:

Thesis Committee Chair

Nicole B. Cox, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Mass Media

Committee Members

Michael H. Eaves, Ph.D.
Professor of Communication

linda p. jurczak, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Communication

Deborah C. Robson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Communication

Associate Provost for Graduate Studies and Research

Becky K. da Cruz, Ph.D., J.D.
Professor of Criminal Justice

Defense Date

June 27, 2018

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Abstract

This research uses a black feminist perspective to examine the portrayal of Cookie Lyon on Fox's popular primetime series, *Empire*. Through a textual analysis of the first three seasons, this study suggests that the Cookie Lyon character defines new representation of black womanhood that empowers and disempowers black women in contemporary society. Five key representations were discovered: the Queen Mother, the Self-sacrificing Savior, the Second-best Love Interest, the Boss, and the Street Outsider. Cookie's depiction as a supportive mother and a powerful, creative woman empowers black women. However, the character and the character's storyline encourages defining women according to black manhood, the abandonment of self-care, colorism, the attainment of power through manipulation, and respectability politics. Thus, the depiction of Cookie Lyon also disempowers black woman. Such television depictions contribute to the establishment and understanding of self-perception among black women and offers a lens through which others perceive black women in American pop culture.

Keywords: black feminism, stereotypes, Empire, Cookie Lyon, black women

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

From kidnappings to faux marriages to political scandals, Fox's melodramatic primetime television series, *Empire*, leaves viewers on edge, anticipating what could be next for the Lyon family. The family's ownership and advancement of a premier record label, Empire Entertainment, proves to be a challenging task as competition for the legacy of the label often leads to dangerous disputes. The series follows former drug dealer, Lucious Lyon (Terrence Howard), as he navigates the music industry and remains true to the hustler mentality that earned him the seat as the founder and CEO of the multi-million dollar record label. However, few *Empire* characters receive as much attention as Cookie Lyon (Taraji P. Henson), the ex-convict who served 17 years in prison and the tell-it-like-it-is ex-wife of Lucious.

For too long, primetime network television was uncharted territory for black women in leading roles and black women as main characters. In 2012, Kerry Washington became the first black female lead in a network drama since the 1970s, with the portrayal of Olivia Pope in the ABC series, *Scandal* (Vega, 2013). At a time when black women are starring in leading roles in more primetime network television shows than ever before, *Empire* provides an opportunity to explore how characters represent black women in the dominant culture and black culture, using a black feminist lens. Black feminist theory focuses on the intersection of identities like race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and age, and how those identities intersect to form unique, overall identities and provide standpoints of black women. Standpoints are perspectives based

on one's personal experiences and connections within specific social groups (Collins, 2004).

A scholarly analysis of *Empire* is significant for many reasons. *Empire* boasts a majority black cast that operates, almost entirely, in a black world; a fact not claimed by many primetime network television shows. Although, in recent years, the number of minority casts on primetime network television has grown. This is evidenced by other popular television series like ABC's *Black-ish* (2014–present), *Fresh off the Boat* (2015–present), and *Dr. Ken* (2015 –2017), as well as NBC's *The Carmichael Show* (2015–2017). However, few of the shows with minority casts have as many black female characters as *Empire*. As of spring 2017, the show includes six black women as main cast members and seven black women as recurring cast members. Since its debut in January 2015, *Empire* has progressed as a breakout series. It is now in its fourth season.

On its first night, *Empire* premiered with a 3.7 Nielsen rating among adults 18–49, which indicated 3.7 percent of all U.S. adults within that age range watched the premiere. *Empire* acquired more than 9.8 million viewers total, making it Fox's highest-rated debut in three years (Hibberd, 2015). The episode before the show's first season finale scored higher in ratings among African Americans aged 18-49 than the 2015 Super Bowl. Approximately 14.9 million viewers watched the broadcast (Collins, 2015). In 2015, Nielsen reported the show's first season finale to be the most tweeted series episode since the organization began publishing television Twitter activity in October 2011. The two-part finale garnered 2.4 million tweets (Nielsen, 2015). In 2017, *Empire* ranked as the top television series among black viewers, who accounted for 65 percent of the series' audience (Levin, 2017).

Beyond its social media popularity, *Empire*'s scholarly relevance extends to its cultural significance. In 2015, Henson and Viola Davis made history as the first black women simultaneously nominated for Emmy awards for Best Actress in a Television Drama in the award's 68-year history (Bucksbaum, 2015). Henson's portrayal as the feisty Cookie Lyon has helped to highlight black female narratives surrounding family, friendship, sexuality, and more.

The academic discourse surrounding current media portrayals of black women in leading roles on primetime television exists primarily through analyses of *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope (Chaney and Robertson, 2016; Pixley, 2015; Warner, 2015). However, no study explores the portrayal of *Empire*'s leading woman, Cookie Lyon, how the character defines new representations of black womanhood, and whether the new representations empower or disempower black women in contemporary society. This study will address the gap in scholarly discussion by analyzing Henson's character across the first three seasons of *Empire* (48 episodes), utilizing textual analysis through a black feminist lens. Five representations were identified and named based on the coded topics of family, sacrifice, love, power, and hustle. Queen Mother was identified based on the topic of family. The Self-sacrificing Savior was identified based on the topic of sacrifice. The Second-best Love Interest was identified based on the topic of love. The Boss was identified based on the topic of power. The Street Outsider was identified based on the topic of hustle.

Through these representations, Cookie Lyon illustrates new images of black womanhood. Cookie's depiction as a supportive mother and a powerful, creative woman empowers black women by presenting a contrasting image of the bad black mother and

highlighting the power of illustrating identity through creative expression. However, the character and the character's storyline encourages defining women according to black manhood, the abandonment of self-care, colorism, the attainment of power through manipulation, and respectability politics. It is argued that although Cookie Lyon creates a space for positive images of black womanhood, she simultaneously creates problems as well. Thus, the depiction of Cookie Lyon also disempowers black women in contemporary society.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Theory

A black feminist viewpoint considers race, class, and gender to be united in such a way that gender identity is accompanied and determined by racial identity (Higginbotham, 1992). Smith (1989) emphasized that the black feminist approach examined the representation of the lives of black women. Black feminist theory has included written and practiced theory by black feminists. It has also included the interpretation of race, gender, and class, all of which placed a primary focus on black women, but not exclusively (Smith, 1989). Identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age intersected to form unique, whole identities and systems of power; this was known as intersectionality (Collins, 2004). Crenshaw (1991) contended that intersectionality led to a deeper understanding of differences among people. Within black feminist theory, the portrayals of black women are explored as well as the credibility of those who have crafted the definition of black womanhood (Collins, 1986). The worldview of black women has been shaped, in part, by a lack of societal privilege (hooks, 2000). Black women have possessed a unique place in society, positioned lower in terms of professional hierarchy and social status (hooks, 2000).

What is now described as the black feminist consciousness was birthed through the feminist wave of the 1960s through the 1980s, which was connected to the modern

Civil Rights Movement. Although black men such as Martin Luther King, Jr. routinely appeared as prominent faces in the fight for justice and equality, black women played critical roles in the initiation and progression of the Civil Rights Movement (Taylor, 1998). The Civil Rights movement eventually evolved into a more political campaign that placed black empowerment at its center. Scholarly discourse surrounding black women and feminism surged in the 1980s. Black feminist scholars and writers theorized historical and modern concepts surrounding gender (Taylor, 1998).

Scholars explored intersectionality in greater detail during the second wave (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005). bell hooks (2000) argued that it was not enough for black women to contribute personal experiences and stories to the feminist movement. Instead, theory and its application needed to be developed to eliminate sexism and additional forms of oppression. hooks used the term "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to describe the interlocking systems of power in society. Using the term white supremacy rather than racism moved the dialogue from one centered on whiteness and white people to one that spoke to political action and an individual's relationship to that action. White supremacist capitalist patriarchy considered the involvement of a person of any race, gender, sex, nationality, class, or sexual orientation in upholding the forces of racism and imperialist collusion.

Black women experienced systematic oppression via race and gender, concurrently (McCall, 2005). Intersectionality has been used to explore the effects of race and gender in a variety of areas, including the experience of higher education faculty members (Mirza, 2015), economic marginalization (Brewer, 2012), disability education

(Gillborn, 2015), technology education among girls of color (Scott & Garcia, 2017), and healthcare workforce diversity (Popper-Giveon, Keshet, & Liberman, 2015).

Having recognized oppression based on race and gender, black feminist thought was significant in its ability to support black women. It encouraged black women to define themselves apart from hegemonic societal beliefs and stereotypes and validated the black female perspective (Collins, 1989). Black women have been noted as "outsiders within." To be an "insider" within the dominant society, black women were required to conform to a worldview that reflected the interests of white males, but they did not reap the benefits of this worldview. As a group, black women have perceived certain aspects of their shared experience similarly. However, the diversity of class, sexuality, age, and religion has led to various expressions of black womanhood (Collins, 1986). Lorde (2012), as a black lesbian and a feminist scholar, championed the idea that celebrating difference, while recognizing sameness, was crucial for strong, dynamic societies. She advanced the question of inclusion within the women's movement that was being led by white women.

Black feminist thought, which developed through personal and cultural experiences, developed in direct opposition to white male insiders (Collins, 1986). Collins (1986) acknowledged three key themes related to black feminism. The first theme was black women's definition of self. By defining themselves, black women rejected the stereotypes used to dehumanize and exploit them and the perceived entitlement of those who had formerly defined black womanhood. Black women asserted their right to define themselves. When black womanhood was not recognized within the scope of feminism by white women, the authority of oppression was furthered (Lorde,

2012; Veaux, 2004). The second theme acknowledged the connection between race, gender, and class oppression (Collins, 1986). Nineteenth-century black women, as a cohesive unit, were said to be more vulnerable to sexist oppression than any other group in America, partially due to their lack of power to oppose victimization, consistently (hooks, 2014). As Crenshaw (1989) noted, to black women, the significance of feminist theory was reduced when it overlooked race. The third theme was the importance of reformulating and communicating black women's culture (Collins, 1986). Contemporary feminism, post-1990s to the present, has been categorized as third wave feminism by some scholars (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). Springer (2002) rejected the use of the term "wave" but acknowledged that the current structure included a greater focus by young black women on racial and gender justice through activism, music, and writing.

Black feminist theory has framed research on media, specifically television, in different contexts. Bobo and Seiter (1991) argued that the *Women of Brewster Place* (1989) television miniseries provided a broadened view of the representation of black women. The show challenged narrow views of sexuality, dominance, and servitude by defying character expectations based on historical images of black women. In television coverage of Freaknik, a popular spring break activity in the early 1990s, news outlets portrayed black women as oversexed harlots (Meyers, 2004). Television shows such as *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990–1996), *Martin* (1992–1997), *Living Single* (1993–1998), and *Moesha* (1995–2001) placed black women as sources of laughter in situation comedies (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Television is an avenue through which black life and culture are viewed. Therefore, television is significant because portrayals have and can serve to represent and speak for black women (Means Coleman, 1998).

Historical Stereotypes of Black Women

Many beliefs and images of African American women derived from historical and social experiences under slavery. The notion that black women were abnormal because of race allowed white men and women to justify the exploitation of black women (Allard, 1991). Deviant representations of black women have been numerous throughout history. Although there have been considerable improvements in images that illustrate the diverse experiences of this group, black women are still largely defined by a limited number and range of representations (Mastro, 2009). Four stereotypical roles historically associated with black women include Matriarch, Sapphire, Jezebel, and Superwoman. Although historical, the stereotypes of Matriarch, Sapphire, Jezebel, and Superwoman have negatively affected the self-esteem of black women today (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004).

Matriarch**.** The Matriarch stereotype has been a prevalent stereotype of black women and, specifically, black mothers. The Matriarch has been described as self-reliant and domineering. She performed the dominant role in marital and family relationships (Fleming, 1983). The Matriarch personified the bad black mother in black homes (Collins, 2002). The term Matriarch was popularized in the 1960s when former Secretary of State Daniel Patrick Moynihan developed a report to examine issues that affected black Americans, and what could be done to encourage their integration into society (Sewell, 2013). He determined that the problems of the black family arose from matriarchy within black culture. Because women were placed as the head of the family, young black men did not receive the emotional or psychological support needed to be productive in society (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Progression of the stereotype

distracted from political and economic issues, as it advanced the narrative that issues can be resolved if good values are taught at home (Collins, 2002).

The Matriarch did not have specific physical characteristics (Sewell, 2013). She was the opposite of the well-known Mammy[1] image, who catered to white families and children and was content with a supporting role (Collins, 2002). An example of the Matriarch figure was Mo'Nique's Oscar-winning portrayal of Mary Lee Johnston in the 2009 film *Precious*. Mary was the brutal mother of 16-year-old Claireece "Precious" Jones. In addition to being physically and verbally abusive to her daughter, Mary disregarded the sexual abuse Precious received from her father, which resulted in two pregnancies. As the mother and daughter struggled to survive on welfare, Mary blamed Precious for all the negativity the family experienced (Harris-Perry, 2009).

Sapphire. The Sapphire stereotype conveyed an attitude of confrontation and was obsessed with rising in status (Kretsedemas, 2010; Thomas et al., 2004). The name originated with the character of Sapphire Stevens, the wife of George "Kingfish" Stevens on the radio and television sitcom, *Amos 'n' Andy* (1928–1960). With her manipulative and nagging demeanor, the Sapphire character was said to be the direct opposite of nurturing and self-sacrificing (West, 1995). She was often shown as a full-figured, brown-skinned woman who spoke in a loud and animated manner. Her main objective was to emasculate the black man using verbal jabs (Jewell, 1993). The Sapphire image was created to find humor in the black woman's attempt to portray characteristics of the

[1] Mammy images related to being nurturing and respectful and also to being a faithful and obedient servant (Thomas et al., 2004). She perceived herself to hold a certain level of "power" in the white family; however, she was content with a supporting role. Her acceptance endorsed the image of the submissive black female and the powerful white male.

white middle-class and, specifically, the white male. Inverted female-male relationships were considered comical and reinforced the idea that black people could not conform to the norms of the dominant white culture thereby reinforcing the superiority of the accepted norms of mainstream society (Kretsedemas, 2010). Today, the contemporary Sapphire image is frequently seen on reality and sitcom television. She is the hostile, aggressive, controlling "sista" with an attitude. Former *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* (2012–2017) cast member, Joseline Hernandez, served as a contemporary example. Throughout the reality show series, she was shown in verbal and physical altercations with men and women. Another example is franchise mate Teairra Mari, who is angry, confrontational, and violent toward *Love and Hip Hop Hollywood* (2014–present) castmates (Veal, 2015).

Some black women have embraced specific characteristics of the Sapphire stereotype. Her willingness to speak candidly about her feelings and opinions, rather than passively accept insults, has been considered a positive trait (Mastro, 2009). Black women who internalized the Sapphire stereotype may believe that they have to be loud to be heard or to gain attention (Thomas et al., 2004). In efforts to appear non-threatening, black women have attempted to curb this aspect of Sapphire, so they are recognized when working with other ethnic groups (Lineberger & Calhoun, 1983).

Jezebel. The Jezebel role characterized black women as deviant sexual beings (Thomas et al., 2004). Jezebel was a biblical figure in the Book of 1 Kings. She used manipulation to acquire land for her husband, King Ahab of Israel, and promoted idolatry within the nation of Israel. Like many of the stereotypical images of black women, the sexually deviant Jezebel stereotype originated during slavery. Jezebel's stereotypical

sexual aggression justified the sexual assaults on slave women by white and black men (Collins, 2002). The rape of black slave women was frequently used to supplement the slave population. Jezebel was often portrayed as a fair-skinned woman with European physical traits who exploited men (West, 1995). However, another representation of Jezebel emerged in 2000s hip hop as the brown-skinned, curvaceous woman who was reduced to a sexual ornament for men. The later image was often represented in hip hop music videos where video vixens were adorned with little clothing, and musical artists relayed demeaning lyrics. In the context of white societal norms, female heterosexuality related to being passive and reserved, while the "hoochies" of African American womanhood represented nonstandard female heterosexuality (Collins, 2002). The overtly sexual Jezebel did not fit into the stereotypical role of women who were virginal and desired romance. Instead, she had many sexual relationships and freely initiated sex (West, 1995).

Although highlighted in hip hop, the Jezebel image has been found in various forms on television, in movies, on the internet, in gaming, and in other genres of music (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Among young adult white men and women of college age, African American women today have been associated more with the Jezebel stereotype. This was believed to be because college students were more aware of the characteristics assigned to the Jezebel stereotype (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005). Davis and Tucker-Brown (2013) found that the internalization of the Jezebel stereotype influenced black women's sexual decisions by encouraging an increase in risky sexual behavior.

Superwoman. Another stereotypical image of black women has been the Superwoman. Just as many other stereotypes of black women found their roots in slavery,

so did the Superwoman. Historically, she was seen as a woman capable of handling an abnormal level of despair and a significant amount of unpleasant work. She was believed to be stronger emotionally than an average woman or man (Wallace, 1999). What is now considered the Superwoman stereotype emerged within the last few decades. Superwoman has been identified as an educated, middle-class professional woman who manages all work with ease. The Superwoman, also known as the overachiever, did not fall prey to the weaknesses and insecurities of other women. Instead, she was strong and assertive. She could handle all challenges in any situation (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). The Superwoman was resourceful and strong (Thomas et al., 2004). She suppressed emotions, resisted vulnerability, and rejected dependence. She was determined to succeed and felt compelled to help others (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

The Superwoman's polished demeanor and leadership skills defied the negative stereotypes of black women. As she rejected the Sapphire and Jezebel, she was positioned as the exception within the black race and, therefore, truly exceptional (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Unlike other historical stereotypes, the Superwoman was intelligent, accomplished, and independent. Although the stereotype may seem positive, it may also be limiting. Contemporary Superwomen are perceived as a threat by their peers because of their overachievement; as a result, they are isolated. A greater disadvantage to the image was the perception that the Superwoman had no weaknesses. She was then expected to go above and beyond an average individual's capabilities with little support (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

The leading roles of television's popular primetime television shows, *Scandal* (2012–2018) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–present) provide recent

grepresentations of the Superwoman image. *Scandal* featured Oliva Pope (Kerry Washington), a smart, independent, crisis management expert who runs Washington, D.C. and the White House. *How to Get Away with Murder* highlights Annalise Keating (Viola Davis), a prominent defense attorney and university professor who is involved in a murder plot with her student interns. Another example of the Superwoman stereotype is Dr. Rainbow Johnson (Tracee Ellis Ross) on the comedy sitcom, *Black-ish* (2014–present). Johnson is a Brown graduate and anesthesiologist who somehow navigates the demanding hours of her career while raising three children with her advertising executive husband, Andre Johnson (Anthony Anderson).

Empire: The Television Series

Set in the glitz and glamour of New York City, *Empire* relays the trials, tragedies, and successes of a celebrity family immersed in hip hop culture. The show was co-created by actor and screenwriter, Danny Strong, and producer and director, Lee Daniels. *Empire* has received both praise and backlash for the co-creators' decision to explore controversial topics like homophobia, mental illness, and sexuality in the African American community. *Huffington Post* writer Blay (2015) commended the show for its progress in helping break down the "respectability" barrier, or the notion that black characters would be more appealing if they appeared to be respectable. Professional black women characters like Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating perform such respectability politics as they are distanced from communities that include black women who are unlike them. In addition, their storylines often ignore institutional racism (Joseph, 2017). Although it was influential in its ability to challenge historical stereotypes of black people and the black family, *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992)

introduced the notion of enlightened racism and promoted respectability politics.[2] Unlike Claire and Heathcliff Huxtable, *Empire* characters lead complex, dramatic, and messy lives. The series challenges viewers to embrace and empathize with black characters with imperfect and complicated backgrounds (Blay, 2015).

The series centers on Lucious Lyon and his quest to rule his empire and the entire hip hop world. Unfortunately for his family, they are often caught in the crossfire of illegal business practices, kidnapping, and even murder. Lucious' three sons, Andre (Trai Byers), Jamal (Jussie Smollett), and Hakeem (Bryshere Gray) possess unique personalities, which continuously disrupt the family dynamic. Andre is the devious businessman with bipolar disorder; Jamal is the musical talent whose sexuality continuously causes controversy; and Hakeem is the confident, aggressive aspiring rapper (Rothman & Feeney, 2015). With its success, *Empire* challenges television executives to aim for diversity, according to *Vulture* writer Lockett (2015). But critics have also accused the show of promoting racial stereotypes. Social commentator and financial scholar, Boyce Watkins, referred to the show as "coonery" and a "ghetto-fied hood drama" that he would not support (Deggans, 2015).

Loretha "Cookie" Lyon, the ex-wife of Lucious and the mother of Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem, is *Empire*'s dynamic female lead. After spending 17 years in prison for taking the fall for charges related to her and her ex-husband's drug business, Cookie is released and sets out to claim her portion of the multi-million dollar company she and her ex-husband began with drug money. Cookie is a strong woman who always puts the

[2] For more discussion on respectability politics, see Jhally and Lewis (1992) or Jones (2017).

needs of her children and her family first. She is raw and remains true to her inner-city roots. In many ways, she is the moral center of the corrupt world that surrounds the Lyon family.[3]

[3] See Appendix A for a complete description of Empire characters and Appendix B for brief summaries of each episode in seasons 1, 2, and 3.

Chapter III

RESEARCH QUESTION

The academic discourse surrounding current media portrayals of black women in leading roles on primetime television does not include an examination of *Empire*'s leading woman, Cookie Lyon. This study utilizes a black feminist lens to analyze her character, and addresses the gap in scholarly discussion surrounding this popular series and its illustration of black womanhood. This study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What new representations of black womanhood does the character Cookie Lyon portray in the primetime television series *Empire*?

RQ2: In what ways does Cookie Lyon's character on the primetime television series *Empire* empower or disempower black women in contemporary society?

Method and Procedures

This study utilizes textual analysis as a method to describe and interpret *Empire*'s Cookie Lyon, how the character defines new representation of black womanhood, and how the character empowers or disempowers black women in contemporary society. Researchers have long used textual analysis to examine television series, themes, and characters and to comprehend cultural assumptions of a text (Fürsich, 2009). For example, Hatfield (2010) used textual analysis to examine hegemonic masculinity in the comedy series *Two and a Half Men* (2003-2015) and Washington (2012) explored

representations of black and Asian interracial relationships on the prime-time television dramas, *ER* (1994–2009) and *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–present). In addition, Park (2011) used textual analysis to examine the ideological implications of racial conflict on the television series *Wife Swap* (2004–2010). Such an approach allows for examination of the verbal messages and performed actions of Cookie Lyon, and what those messages convey about black women. The first three seasons of Empire (48 episodes) were viewed via the official DVDs. Each episode was labeled according to the episode name and overall episode number. All scenes that included Cookie Lyon were noted and transcribed.

After transcription, episode scenes were examined to determine recurring topics. The topics of family, sacrifice, love, power, and hustle [4] were noted for their frequency in scenes that involved Cookie Lyon. The scenes were reviewed once more and coded using the previously listed topics. The scenes were then grouped according to the coded topics. Five representations were identified and named based on the coded topics. Queen Mother was identified based on the topic of family. The Self-sacrificing Savior was identified based on the topic of sacrifice. The Second-best Love Interest was identified based on the topic of love. The Boss was identified based on the topic of power. The Street Outsider was identified based on the topic of hustle.

[4] Hustle is defined as singular or plural acts performed by a hustler, or one deeply embedded in street life and the drug economy (Copes, Hochstetler, & Williams, 2008).

Chapter IV

REDEFINING REPRESENTATION

It is difficult to deny the critical role women play in the success of the *Empire* series. Media portrayals of black women on *Empire* reinforce and even transform the lenses through which black and mainstream culture perceive the experiences and values of black women. For some, Cookie Lyon provides guidance on how to behave, what to expect and how to interact when faced with similar, though less dramatic, situations related to family, love, work, and self. As noted in the literature review, much research has been done to examine historical stereotypes. The primary focus of this study is not to explore how Cookie Lyon compares or deviates from historical stereotypes but to examine how the character helps to develop new representations of black womanhood. As *Empire* presents exaggerated challenges in the life of a hip hop family, the series also presents varied representations of a black woman. Cookie Lyon is depicted in five fundamental ways: as Queen Mother, the Self-sacrificing Savior, the Second-best Love Interest, the Boss, and the Street Outsider.

The Queen Mother

A recurring topic on *Empire* is Cookie's placement as the nucleus of the familial bond, which defines her representation as the Queen Mother. She is portrayed as the authority figure of the Lyon family who is strong, wise, vulnerable, loving, and

committed. Cookie conforms to Reid-Brinkley's (2008) description of a Queen[5] as one deserving of respect. She is more aligned with the Queen stereotype because of her overwhelming dedication to the advancement of black manhood. Cookie's depth is primarily characterized by her relationship with Lucious and her sons Jamal, Hakeem, and Andre. Most of the series places Cookie as the love interest of Lucious. The daily actions of the pair's children dictate many of her actions. As Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem fight amongst themselves and with Lucious, Cookie, as the authority figure, often settles disputes by deciding the best solution that will benefit the entire family instead of one individual.

Cookie differs from the historical representation of the domineering and emasculating Matriarch in that she is considered a loving mother who finds joy in the success of her children. She often appears strong but is also vulnerable in front of her sons to establish an environment where they feel comfortable being vulnerable and emotional themselves. For the family's most significant moments, Cookie serves as the family voice. For example, in season one, Jamal and Hakeem perform for investors and Lucious' voice suddenly becomes hoarse; he is unable to deliver his speech. Anika and Andre each want to deliver the speech on Lucious behalf, but he insists that Cookie delivers it and represents the family. As the central figure of the family bond, Cookie will remind the stakeholders that Empire is a family business built for their sons.

[5] In earlier work, the Queen was idolized as the "good" black woman and placed on a pedestal as a representation of the goodness and pureness of the black race. She was praised by black men for recognizing her position in black culture as being behind black men and one who helped to elevate black manhood (Reid-Brinkley, 2008).

Distinct relationships exist between Cookie and each of her sons. She does not parent with a one-size-fits-all philosophy. Through their interactions, Cookie displays characteristics of the Queen Mother[6]–strength, wisdom, vulnerability, love, and commitment–depending on the needs of each son. Cookie and Jamal have an especially close bond, one that exists within a realm of friendship, devotion, adoration, and protection. Upon Cookie's release from prison, Jamal was the first person she visited. Soon after, she became his manager and music producer. As a young child, Jamal was physically placed in an outdoor trashcan by Lucious after Jamal wore Cookie's high heels. The incident alluded to Lucious' rejection of Jamal's homosexuality and Cookie's protection of Jamal, given that she pulled him out of the trashcan and lovingly held him close. Out of all three sons, Jamal routinely shows the most affection and appreciation for his mother. During a family dinner in season 3 episode 7, Jamal sings a song that he wrote about his mother's commitment to her family. He describes her as a "warrior" who "gave it all so unselfishly." He then says, "You're the reason for my being here. Mama, I'm so grateful." The song details the sacrifices Cookie made for her family, all in the name of love. Jamal communicated how much Cookie is appreciated.

Cookie strays from the close confidante representation and functions as a disciplinarian to Hakeem, her youngest son. However, she constantly tries to prove to him how much she loves him. As the youngest, Hakeem is the son with whom Cookie has spent the least amount of time due to her imprisonment. As a result, Hakeem is the

[6] The term Queen Mother has not been used in previous scholarly work to identify a media representation for black women. This representation was named based on the framing of the Cookie Lyon character as a Queen, one who is worthy of respect and who is often praised by black men for being fully-committed to the advancement of black manhood, and as a Mother, one who serves as both a maternal figure and the source of the familial bond.

son who feels the most abandoned by Cookie. In season 2 episode 8, Lucious challenged Hakeem to represent Lyon Dynasty, Cookie and Hakeem's newly-formed competing label, during a rap battle against female rapper Freda Gatz. It is an opportunity for Hakeem to illustrate the division between himself and his father and display evidence of Lyon Dynasty's talent and likely success. Cookie did not help Hakeem prepare for what he describes as the most significant battle of his life. Instead, he discovers her secretly video conferencing with Jamal. He asks Cookie why what he does is never good enough for her and why she loves Jamal more than him.

> Hakeem: So you working with Jamal? That's why I can't get you to help me with the biggest battle of my life? The battle for Dynasty?
>
> Cookie: It's not what you think Hakeem.
>
> Hakeem: How come, nothing I do is good enough for you? What makes you love Jamal more than me?
>
> Cookie: Boy, come over here and sit down. Look, I'm sorry I hurt you, okay? But this deal is the biggest thing to ever happen to Jamal and if I can make it happen, then maybe I can get Jamal back here with us.

She apologizes to her youngest son for hurting him and explains that Jamal's chance at a Pepsi deal is the biggest thing to ever happen to him and she's attempting to recruit him to Lyon Dynasty. Throughout the series, Cookie repeatedly attempts to prove her love and devotion to Hakeem. Cookie recognizes Hakeem's desperate desire to move out of his father's musical shadow to establish his legacy. As a result, she leaves Empire and joins with Hakeem to create Lyon Dynasty. As the company grows in popularity, Hakeem and Cookie begin to receive threats. Hakeem is kidnapped and eventually returned to his family. In season 2 episode 6, Cookie and Hakeem confront his kidnappers and Cookie is unaware that Hakeem has a gun. When she realizes it, she

steps in front of him and tearfully pleads for him to give her the gun. She tells him she'd rather die than lose him.

> Cookie: Put the gun down, Hakeem, okay? Hakeem, if you pull the trigger, you're gonna force me to step in front of the bullet. I'd rather die than lose you again. Please.

Cookie positions herself in front of a gun to stop Hakeem from making a decision that will cost him his life. She communicates to him that living without him is not a life she wants to live. Such an action illustrates the length Cookie is willing to go to prove her love and commitment to her youngest son. As the Queen Mother, she is willing to sacrifice her life.

Cookie alternates between treating her eldest son, Andre, as an adult and an adolescent. Unlike her relationship with Hakeem, she rarely disciplines Andre. Additionally, their relationship does not contain the friendship dynamic as does her relationship with Jamal. In contrast, Cookie interacts with Andre as if he is fragile, often employing soft tones and gentle gestures in their one-on-one interactions. Her treatment of Andre can be attributed to his experience of living with bipolar disorder. When Andre refuses to take his medication, he is committed to a hospital for treatment. Initially, Cookie is in denial that Andre has bipolar disorder, dismissing the mental illness and suggested therapy as "white people problems." She suggests that Andre is strong and does not need therapy. Cookie's attitude illustrates the stigmatization of mental illness in the black community ("Breaking the Silence," 2016) and the negative perception of black men needing and accepting help for mental disorders (Davis, 2013). However, toward the end of season 1 and into season 2, Cookie encourages Andre to continue his therapy sessions and to take medication for bipolar disorder. In season 1, episode 2, she is shown

researching facts about the disorder. In season 3, it is revealed that Lucious' estranged mother has bipolar disorder, which is why she abandoned him during his childhood. Once Cookie witnesses the treatments' positive effects on Andre's mental health, she becomes one of the most vocal supporters of Andre receiving treatment.

Cookie's relationship with Andre is defined by his position as the eldest Lyon brother, one who understands the progression of the Lyon family from poverty to wealth. As the eldest, he has endured Lucious' mistreatment the longest. Cookie is often vulnerable with him in efforts to comfort him or encourage his openness and vulnerability. In season 3 episode 2, she praises Andre for his success.

> Andre: I don't know anybody that's lost more than you. And you survived it. You're still here; you're still fighting.
>
> Cookie: You're a fighter, too, Andre. I mean, after I met your grandmother, everything makes sense now. And I admire you even more. I mean, Andre, look at what all you've accomplished.
>
> Cookie: Look, come here. Sit down. I'm proud of you. No, no, no, no. I'm proud of you, Andre. Didn't nobody have no summits for you when I got locked away. You figured it out all on your own. You fought your way out of the hood, baby. You got yourself into Wharton. You did that. Against all obstacles. Against everything this world throws at black people. You fought your way out. Keep fighting. Please, okay? Cause I got you. I got you no matter what.
>
> Andre: No matter what?
>
> Cookie: No matter what, baby. You're going to be all right, baby.

In a childlike nature, Andre seeks comfort from his mother, who he believes, is the only person who can relate to losing as much in life as he has. Once again Cookie presents herself as an emotionally available, nurturing mother who finds comfort in consoling her children. In season 2, Andre, Cookie, and Jamal are at the hospital visiting Rhonda, Andre's wife, as she recovers from a tragic accident that resulted in the loss of their child.

As the hospital prepares to release Rhonda, Andre discloses that Rhonda is scared that she will not be able to have children again. Cookie reveals that she had a miscarriage once and was devastated. She and Lucious thought the miscarriage was the end of the world, but they eventually had three sons. Within the interconnecting systems of power that hooks (2000) describes as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, Cookie displays vulnerability and encourages Andre to find strength in his vulnerability. As a result, emotional well-being becomes the center of attention. Such freedom provides black women, as well as black men, the platform to freely discuss the intersectional experience and the struggles that exist within it.

Considering Cookie's position as the central figure of the Lyon family, Cookie's representation as Queen Mother becomes evident, as does her ability to both empower and disempower black women. The evolution of each male figure of the Lyon family depends greatly on the support of Cookie. The domineering black woman, as exemplified by the Matriarch and Sapphire stereotypes, is no longer the cause of the strife and failure of the black family, as popularized through entertainment and politics (Patterson, 2010). Instead, she is the foundation of the family's success and progression. A strong, wise, vulnerable, loving, and committed woman, the portrayal assists in destroying the narrative of the emasculating black mother by offering an alternative perspective on the black family. Cookie, the heart of the Lyon family bond, is often perceived to be the voice of wisdom to those around her. She is worthy of respect and admiration, a true queen with a deep dedication to the men in her life. She consistently expresses love and support toward her sons Jamal, Andre, and Hakeem. In this way, the representation of Queen Mother empowers black women by presenting an account of an

attentive, supportive mother whose decisions create future opportunities for her children to succeed.

However, Cookie's identity is entirely based on what is going on in the lives of her sons. While supporting black manhood, Cookie's identity becomes defined by her interactions within black manhood. It can be argued that Cookie, herself, elects the role of Queen Mother as a primary identity because her role as a conventional mother figure was forcibly taken from her due to prison. While this is true, womanhood being crafted based on the needs of men is still problematic. Cookie's version of the Queen Mother simultaneously disempowers black women by perpetuating the idea that being defined within black manhood is acceptable. Black women are stripped of the opportunity to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings to determine who they are and who they want to be. Instead, the representation conditions them to believe that black women are defined according to who black men need them to be.

Self-sacrificing Savior

Incarcerated for 17 years, Cookie is the character that has made the most profound sacrifice for the Lyon family. Cookie's tendency to sacrifice physical, emotional and mental self-care serves as a paramount aspect of her identity throughout the series. Self-care operates as such a crucial element of the black woman's identity that Lorde (1988) states: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 132). Such a statement notes the significance of insisting to an oppressive society that the needs and desires of black women matter. At a young age, Cookie begins to regularly abandon self-care and promote the desires of others above her own. As a teenager, Cookie severs ties with her father and abandons dreams of attending

college and becoming a medical doctor to continue a romantic relationship with Lucious. She eventually becomes a drug dealer for Lucious in North Philly, insisting he needs to focus more on music and his budding rap career. It is revealed to viewers that Cookie's nearly two-decade prison term results from a deal gone wrong and her refusal to reveal Lucious' involvement.

Cookie Lyon relates to the Superwoman stereotype in her perceived ability to endure great despair so that others do not. However, she differs from the stereotype in several ways. She is often vulnerable, as Lucious is depicted as her greatest weakness. In addition, the Superwoman's refined demeanor and professionalism are unlike Cookie's inner-city background. Frequently, Cookie reminds Lucious and her sons that the lifestyle she lived in North Philly and her incarceration were for the good of the family. However, the sacrifice is often met with contention, mainly by her youngest son Hakeem, who blames the sacrifice for limiting her ability to assume a traditional motherly role as a nurturer. Hakeem's feelings of being neglected by his mother support Cookie's characterization as the Matriarch. Cookie further supports the stereotype by constantly sacrificing emotional and mental well-being for the supposed betterment of the family. As black feminist theory notes, in a world where hegemonic societal beliefs are used to define black womanhood, the varied experiences and perspectives of black women are defined, to some degree, by a lack of privilege. The lack of privilege extends to the inability to practice self-care without being characterized as fragile or weak for not living up to the unrealistic idea of the strong black woman.

Cookie's certainty about the obligation to sacrifice self-care is reinforced in season 1 episode 4. Cookie volunteers to visit the mother of a successful rap artist who

encountered trouble with law enforcement for assaulting another rap artist. Cookie's ultimate goal is to encourage the mother, Fatima, to persuade her son, Titan, to sign with Empire. Cookie's chief strategy is to appeal to Fatima, a member of the Nation of Islam, by discussing her choice to endure prison for her sons. Her sacrifice, although she contends that it was for the good of her family, plays a dual role as a cause of inner pain and as a motherly obligation. In a discussion between the two women, the inner anguish caused by Cookie's sacrifice is presented as a consequence of motherhood:

> Fatima: You must be happy to be back home.
>
> Cookie: I'm back, but I ain't home. I fall asleep now just as lonely as I was on that cot. All those years, the thought of me holding my own again gave me so much peace. But here I am. My husband left me. My oldest is too ashamed. My youngest don't even remember.
>
> Fatima: I feel your pain sister. You gave up your best years for them kids, and now you have to beg their forgiveness for the sacrifice you made. It's not fair. But it's called being a mother, ain't it?
>
> Cookie: Yes, indeedy.

Cookie is reminded that emotional and physical misery for the sake of one's family is an expectation of motherhood. Fatima's support of sacrificing and begging for forgiveness reinforces Cookie's belief that, as a mother and a former wife, her self-care is less important. Cookie's response to Fatima illustrates Cookie's views about her own identity. She exists to care for others above caring for herself.

Few actions illustrate the extent Cookie is willing to abandon self-care for the good of her family more than the relationship she maintains with her chief rival and Lucious' ex-fiancé, Anika. Cookie's relationship with Anika is often a source of emotional distress. After it is revealed that Anika is carrying Hakeem's child, Cookie

assumes the role of nurturer and supporter toward her adversary. By doing so, she sacrifices emotional self-care for the benefit of her son and future grandchild. Cookie's demonstration of sacrifice is consistent with scholarly research that found women illustrate to others that they are "good mothers" by sacrificing personal needs and self-interest (Baker, 2009; Heisler & Ellis, 2008). Hakeem asks Cookie to be the voice of reason when Anika prepares to commit suicide by jumping off a ledge in season 2 episode 18:

> Cookie: Anika? Look, I know we had bad blood between us, but you are carrying a life, my grandson, so you'll never be alone. You hear me? 'Cause I know what that feels like. You're a Lyon now. Okay? Isn't that what you always wanted, huh? To be one of us? Yeah. I know. It's gonna be okay. I know. It's gonna be all right. Come on.

Later, Anika is forced to marry Lucious to refrain from testifying against him in a federal case. Cookie later laments that she did not save Anika's life for Anika to eventually ruin Cookie's life. Nevertheless, Cookie helps Lucious present the marriage as an authentic nuptial to Tariq Cousins, Lucious' half-brother and an unrelenting FBI agent. At a "family" dinner in season 3 episode 1, Tariq undermines Cookie's emotional and mental sacrifice by verbalizing an apparent truth: Despite Cookie's sacrifices, Lucious continuously chooses another as his romantic love interest. Tariq says that Cookie "keeps playing second fiddle to this mulatto bitch." He then asks Cookie if she is going to "keep on protecting [Lucious] while he treats you like second-rate trash?"

As black feminist writer and scholar Evette Dionne notes, black women are frequently seen as primary sources of strength for their communities, which supports characteristics of the Superwoman stereotype. As a result, placing individual needs and self-worth first is perceived as damaging to the community (Mirk, 2016). Cookie's

representation as the Self-sacrificing Savior disempowers black women by advancing the idea that black women are obligated to abandon self-care for the betterment of those around them. Such lack of self-care can be viewed as an affirmation to refrain from emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual improvement. Having spent 17 years in prison after refusing to betray Lucious, Cookie sacrifices physical, emotional, and mental well-being to save others from the same turmoil. She goes to great lengths to demonstrate this concept, often enduring distress even for her enemies. The portrayal incorrectly suggests that black women possess a form of supernatural strength and that such attention to oneself is not vital. However, in a time where sexual violence, police brutality, and white supremacy are encountered daily through traditional and digital platforms, self-care for black women is vital.

Second-best Love Interest

Another representation that Cookie Lyon displays on *Empire* is the Second-best Love Interest. The root of the Second-best Love Interest stems from the action of putting one's devotion to a man and desires for a man first, despite the disastrous consequences. This occurs through Cookie's repeated romantic interactions with Lucious. She desires to be with him, but she is often found competing for his affection. Cookie imagines a future with Lucious despite his romantic relationship with Anika. A hostile relationship develops between the two women; thereby, setting in opposition the darker-skinned, street-wise Cookie against the lighter-skinned, affluent Anika. The hegemonic internalized system of colorism, where lighter-skinned African Americans are given preference because of their physical features, exists as an undertone throughout the series (Steele, 2016). In the black community, dark-skinned women are more likely to

experience the negative impacts of colorism on their self-esteem and self-concept (Thompson & Keith, 2001). As noted by Collins (1986), a central theme in black feminist theory is an individual's right to self-definition and self-valuation. Lucious' illustration of colorism in treating Cookie as the Second-best Love Interest stands in direct opposition to Cookie's right to define herself within black womanhood.

Lucious desires to be romantically and emotionally intimate with Cookie and Anika, attempting to love them both at the same time. However, Anika is usually the choice of Lucious' affection and admiration. He once described her as the "DNA" of Empire, although Cookie served a 17-year prison term to protect him. Lucious' admiration of Anika over Cookie causes Cookie to become violent. At a surprise meeting with the heads of Empire employees, Lucious appoints Anika as the new head of artists and repertoire (A&R). Later that night, Cookie returns to Empire to find Lucious working on his upcoming album. She has a bat and proceeds to destroy Empire property, shattering glass, breaking a piano and destroying Lucious' records. She points out the pair's dream of building Empire before the success and alludes to the crucial nature of her commitment to his talent and him. Lucious refers to her as a "hood rat" and "bitch" and tells her she will die, as Cookie continues to smash everything in her path. She eventually hits him with the bat, and he begins to bleed after falling in glass.

> Cookie: Trying to erase me, Lucious? Huh? After all I done for you. I did 17 years for this family. You built this company on my back. And you just gonna give it to that bitch?! Is that your plan, Lucious? Huh?

The two eventually embrace as if to have sex, but Cookie stops the forthcoming sexual experience by telling him she's done with him. However, it is revealed in a later episode that the two become romantically involved once again.

When Cookie begins a relationship with Lucious, a drug dealer, as a teenager, Cookie's father does not agree with the relationship. He warns her of the potential of Lucious dealing drugs to disrupt Cookie's life, as well as the lives of her two younger sisters because of the siblings' close relationship. Her father eventually tells her to leave the house. Soon after, her father dies of a heart attack. Committing to Lucious over her father's wishes and guilt over her father's death are the reasons she fights so hard for peace within her current family and accepts treatment as Lucious' less desirable alternative. After seeing home videos of a teenage Cookie with her father and sisters, Jamal is motivated to create a visual music album that illustrates joy, vibrancy, and love through the eyes of his mother. The home videos reminded Cookie how her life changed after sacrificing so much for love.

> Cookie: And after that, we were all each other had. Your father and I, we practically raised each other. I mean . . . hustling and surviving together in the streets.
>
> Jamal: I don't know what to say.
>
> Cookie: That's why all roads lead to Lucious. For Carol, for Candice, for all of us. If you need to use those videos because they inspire you, I will let you do that, Jamal, but I can't watch that mess.

She settles as Second-best Love Interest because, from the start of their relationship, Cookie prioritizes her love for Lucious despite the consequences. Cookie's involvement with Lucious determines future decisions for all those connected to Cookie.

Lucious' treatment of Cookie as the Second-best Love Interest continues to speak to the narrative of dark-skinned women as second rate. Such representation exemplifies the adopted system of oppression within the black community and, therefore, disempowers black women in contemporary society. The hostile relationship between

the two women continues to stimulate the destructive, internalized system of colorism, where lighter skin is believed to be more desirable than darker skin. Skin color does not and should not signify one's value. In addition, Cookie is presented as second best to Anika's Jezebel stereotype. Although affluent, Anika is promiscuous and sexually immoral. She uses sex to advance in her personal and professional life. Cookie does not use sex in the same way. Pitting the two characters against each other advances the belief that being sexually deviant is more desirable and more acceptable. Such a belief disempowers black women in contemporary society because it continues to progress the false notion that, for black women, success is tied to sex. Rejecting both colorism and myths related to stereotypical images like Jezebel allow black women to define themselves and freely relay true, lived experiences within black womanhood.

Boss

Another way in which Cookie Lyon projects a new form of representation is as a Boss. Female hip hop artist Nicki Minaj describes a boss as a mogul that commands control over one's business and creative activities (*Time*, 2017). Wealth is a valuable asset to all Empire characters. Wealth is determined by the amount of power one possesses. Power is dependent on the level of influence. Influence is experienced differently by Lucious and Cookie. Lucious' influence is characterized by fear and authority, while Cookie's influence is represented by creativity, manipulation, and control.

The power to create, be it music or through music-focused events, allows Cookie to establish her significance in various life roles. For example, Cookie requires that Lucious' tribute concert is produced as "Cookie Lyon Presents the Lucious Lyon Sound."

While away during a romantic weekend with Malcolm Deveaux, Empire Entertainment's new head of security and Cookie's season 1 love interest, Cookie continues to work on the project, confessing to Malcolm that it will be her most significant accomplishment. Cookie's power also stems from confidence in her abilities to produce quality musical content. As Cookie and Hakeem endeavor to start a new company, she states that the name is not what is most important. She tells Hakeem that she and Lucious built Empire from her sister's living room. It eventually grew into a multimillion-dollar company. The new company, she says, will also eventually live up to its given name. In these ways, creativity allows Cookie to operate with a level of control she has lacked throughout her life, as a wife, a mother, and an inmate.

Manipulation is also one means through which Cookie enacts the representation of Boss. Cookie sometimes uses manipulation to gain control of a situation. Doing so is not presented as a negative factor to the viewer. Instead, Cookie is presented as clever, finding a way when there is none. For example, Cookie tricks prosecutor Roxanne Ford into destroying a major deal Lucious had in place to acquire Apex Radio. She tells Roxanne that Bunkie, Cookie's murdered cousin, and Lucious were fighting over the radio station deal before Bunkie's death. Roxanne aims to stop Lucious from getting what he wants. Cookie lies and manipulates Roxanne. In doing so, she gains control over the situation. In another episode, Jamal changes the name of his album from the "Black and White" album to "When Cookie Met Lucious." It tells the story of his parent's young love, which eventually turns tragic. Lucious is sick in bed and does not know about the new plan for the album. Cookie wants to push the album while he is sick, declaring that Lucious did not postpone work on his album while Jamal was in

rehab trying to recover after taking a bullet for his father. Cookie proclaims that she is the "sole healthy CEO" and has the power to move the project forward. In yet another scene as the newly appointed Empire CEO, Hakeem designates Cookie as head of artists and repertoire (A&R) for Empire. Empire then acquires Lyon Dynasty. Cookie ultimately plans the move so that she can force Hakeem's lover, Camilla Marks-Whiteman, out of the family business from inside the company.

Cookie's position as a Boss, a powerful figure with significant control over her own business and creative endeavors, creates a new dynamic from which black women are defined. The Boss representation empowers black women by illustrating power through creativity, but it also disempowers black women by illustrating power through manipulation. The significance of creativity within Cookie's character relates to the current cultural expansion of "Black Girl Magic," which encourages black women to celebrate the beauty, power, and resilience found in their identity (Wilson, 2016). Cookie is represented as ambitious, capable, confident, dedicated, and talented via her creative endeavors. Cookie's musical creativity validates her significance as a producer, manager, and label owner. Creativity gives black women permission to freely express themselves. The freedom to be reflective and imaginative allows black women to construct their own identities, which is a central concept in black feminist theory. However, Cookie's use of manipulation points to the historical stereotypes of black women as Jezebel and Sapphire, deviously using manipulation to gain control and rise in status. The use of manipulation also suggests that black women have to use deceitful motives to advance in life because they lack notable skills. Such representation limits black women by connecting them to negative stereotypes that others believe to be true about them. That representation is not

reflective of lived experiences. Misrepresentation ultimately affects how black women are treated in society.

Street Outsider

Cookie's commitment and connection to the streets also defines her as the Street Outsider. Even with wealth and popularity, Cookie is always categorized as the Street Outsider in contrast to members of the black elite, upper-class individuals with wealth, political power, and prestige. Cookie's inner-city background and incarceration position her as the "other." Othering is described as the classification of an individual or group as not belonging to another group, and therefore, treated as less than, based on the assigned group (Canales, 2000). Cookie's status as a Street Outsider is harmful to Angelo's societal status.[7] For example, after Angelo finds a gun hidden at Cookie's place, he tells her that whether he becomes mayor or not, he is trying to build a life with her. Because of that, she has to refrain from activities that do not belong in "our world." Cookie does not belong in Angelo's world; however, he attempts to make a new version of her fit. He requests that she no longer participate in criminal or unrefined activities related to her past. Instead, he introduces her to high-society parties and political fundraisers.

Cookie's interactions with Angelo's mother, Diana DuBois, further defines the gap between the Street Outsider and members of the black elite. In season 3 episode 7, Cookie and her sons have dinner with Angelo and Diana at Cookie's apartment, which she redecorates to appear more suitable to the matriarch of the prominent family. Oddly,

[7] Angelo is a New York City councilman and Cookie's love interest in season 3. He is from a well-respected, wealthy black family. He proposes to Cookie, but she eventually breaks up with him after revealing that she is still in love with Lucious.

Diana attempts to identify with Cookie and make her feel more comfortable by revealing that the DuBois family has a criminal past, too.

> Diana: I can tell you've gone above and beyond to try to impress me. But my blood ain't blue. My granddaddy was a bootlegger. His daddy was a smuggler. Now, we've managed to scrub ourselves clean. But you and your family remind me of where we came from. I see why Angelo is attracted to you. You got fire in you. You just make sure that fire doesn't burn my child. My only child.

The revelation serves as a warning to Cookie. Although the DuBois family had a questionable past, they eventually distanced themselves from that history and became members of the black upper class. Cookie is expected to do the same.

Throughout the series, Cookie continues to be presented as a Street Outsider, choosing to remain loyal to street culture and codes, despite her net worth. Although she is aware of her position as a Street Outsider, she perceives her positioning much differently than how members of the black elite classify her. Cookie perceives her positioning as a sacrifice. For example, she comments that if it weren't for women like herself, women like Anika would only be able to get ahead by using their bodies to pleasure men. For that, Cookie believes she deserves respect. In another episode, Cookie tells Angelo that he is not better than her and that she is not ashamed of who she is, her inner-city beginnings, her criminal background, or how hard she and Lucious worked to build Empire from nothing to a multi-million dollar company. Angelo acknowledges that he understands and respects Cookie and the music she creates. However, when Cookie refuses to marry Angelo, he again positions Cookie as other by labeling Cookie as "poison" and the Lyon family as "garbage."

The perception of Cookie as the Street Outsider and therefore less than by the DuBois family disempowers black women because it contributes to the idea that black

women are more acceptable when adhering to politics of respectability. The Street Outsider characterization stems from Cookie's position as inferior to members of the black elite. Because of her inner-city background and incarceration, she is treated as the "other," and thus subordinate. Just as middle-class black women in the early twentieth century believed in modesty and respectability as a technique to counter the myth of black women as aggressive, hypersexualized Jezebels, the DuBois family believes in respectability politics to force members of the black community, like Cookie, into a more palatable mainstream representation of black culture (Higginbotham, 1994; Hine, 1994). Acceptance of conventional, narrowly defined images of black women leaves little room for the authentic realities that make up black womanhood. Some realities include a rough urban background and some do not. The promotion of respectability politics falsely encourages equality only for members of black society who appear to be more dignified in the eyes of white society. Failure to legitimize varied experiences promotes the notion that fair, just treatment is only deserved by black women who fit an acceptable standard.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION

The representation of black womanhood on primetime television continues to be a significant focus as producers and writers develop more series that center on the lives of black women. As primetime television shows strive to become more racially inclusive, black women hold more leading roles than ever before in the lucrative programming spot. A scholarly analysis of *Empire*'s Cookie Lyon illustrates that the character presents new representation of black womanhood that somewhat empowers, but overwhelmingly disempowers black women in contemporary society.

First, Cookie Lyon as Queen Mother, the Self-sacrificing Savior, the Second-best Love Interest, the Boss, and the Street Outsider offers lenses through which viewers may perceive black women in American pop culture. Forms of media, such as television, serve as channels to perpetuate stereotypical beliefs. As previous scholarly work has demonstrated, television depictions contribute to establishing and understanding cultural self-perceptions (Means Coleman, 1998). The representations outlined provide a guideline for the behavior and expectations of black women and girls. As Fisherkeller (1999) noted, minority viewers consider ethnic minority characters as role models.

Although empowering depictions of Cookie as a supportive mother and an influential black creative challenge negative stereotypes of black women, the future implications of the Cookie Lyon character portrayal and the newly defined representations are problematic overall. As the character continues to gain popularity,

similar depictions of black women on the small screen will be created and more disempowering messages to and about black women will develop. As Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi, (2017) report, negative television representations cause racial minorities to view their ingroup negatively. Negative representation limits black women to assigned positions that appease the interests of others. It also affects how black women view themselves and comprehend societal pressures and struggles (Harris-Perry, 2011).

This study attempts to contextualize *Empire*'s Cookie Lyon and explores the complexities within which black womanhood is expressed to the masses. This study contributes to black feminist theory and media representation by reiterating the importance of fighting against damaging stereotypes that challenge the perception of a black woman's self-worth and emphasizing the necessity of self-definition. Additionally, the work modernizes the concept of respectability politics and its existence within the black community. Such an illustration of the concept reinforced the importance of celebrating the varied expressions of black womanhood.

This study examines new representations of black womanhood based on *Empire*'s Cookie Lyon and whether the new representations empower or disempower black women in contemporary society. There is potential for further research to investigate how black women identify with the new representations in their daily, lived experiences. Additional research could advance understanding of black women's interpretation of recent black leading characters in primetime television, such as Cookie. Studies could also explore how black men that watch *Empire* interpret the new representations.

Characters like Cookie promote disempowering messages, but the representations should not be overlooked. Critiquing the portrayals will pave the way for greater understanding of the effects of media images in the lives of black women. For better or worse, characters like Cookie Lyon represent black womanhood to the masses. As we examine what makes them popular, problematic, inspiring and influential, changes in the representations of black women on primetime television will surely follow.

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APPENDIX A:

Main Character Descriptions

Appendix A

Main Character Descriptions

This list contains a brief description of main and recurring characters in *Empire* seasons 1, 2, and 3.

Cookie Lyon. Cookie is *Empire*'s female lead. She is the ex-wife of music mogul Lucious Lyon and the mother of Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem. After spending 17 years in prison for taking the fall for charges related to her and her ex-husband's drug dealing business, Cookie is released and sets out to claim her portion of the multi-million dollar company she and her ex-husband began with drug money.

Lucious Lyon. Lucious is *Empire*'s male lead. He is the ex-husband of Cookie Lyon and the head of Empire Entertainment. A former drug dealer, Lucious has a very dangerous past that often comes back to haunt him and his family.

Hakeem Lyon. Hakeem is the youngest son of Lucious and Cookie. He is a rapper on Empire Entertainment and often said to be Lucious' favorite, according to his brothers Jamal and Andre. Hakeem was a toddler when Cookie went to prison.

Jamal Lyon. Jamal is the middle son of Lucious and Cookie. He is a music artist on Empire Entertainment. He is openly gay and is often ridiculed and belittled by his father because of it. He is considered to be Cookie's favorite, according to his brother Hakeem and Andre.

Andre Lyon. Andre is the eldest son of Lucious and Cookie. He is the CFO of Empire Entertainment and a Wharton business school graduate. Andre has bipolar disorder. Despite his intelligence, he frequently uses sex and manipulation to solve problems.

Anika Calhoun. Anika, also known as "Boo Boo Kitty" is a main character on *Empire*. The daughter of a doctor, Anika is a Louisiana debutante whose ear for music and business savvy landed her the job as head of A&R at Empire Entertainment. She was initially engaged to Lucious, but the engagement was eventually called off after Anika discovered Lucious infidelities with his ex-wife. Anika began plotting to destroy Empire with her new love interest, Hakeem, but that plan eventually failed.

Rhonda Lyon. Rhonda is the wife of Andre Lyon. She is very loyal and supports Andre's mission to one day lead Empire Entertainment. She supports Andre's efforts to use sex and manipulation to succeed.

Freda Gathers/ Freda Gatz. Freda is a female rapper who Lucious discovers and instantly pits against his son Hakeem. She is signed to Gutter Life Records, a subsidiary of Empire Entertainment that focuses mainly on gangster rap music. She is portrayed as a raw up-and-coming musical artist who experienced a rough life as the child of a major drug dealer

Tariq Cousins. Tariq is an FBI agent set on making sure Lucious is imprisoned for his former and current crimes. He is revealed to be Lucious' half brother.

Recurring Character Descriptions

Camilla Marks-Whiteman. Camilla is a fashion designer and love interest of Hakeem, whom she is much older than. Sensing her influence over his youngest son, Lucious bribes Camilla to stay away from Hakeem and to leave New York. She did not take the bribe but was still forced to leave the state. She later returns to New York where it is revealed that she is the wife of the woman who eventually gained control of Empire.

Angelo DuBois. Angelo is a New York City councilman and Cookie's love interest in season 3. He is from a well-respected, wealthy black family. He proposes to Cookie, but she eventually breaks up with him after revealing that she is still in love with Lucious.

Diana DuBois. Diana is the mother of Angelo DuBois. She is the matriarch of the wealthy DuBois family.

Carol Holloway. Carol is a mother of three and the youngest sister of Cookie Lyon. She is a recovering drug addict who sometimes slips back into old habits.

Candace Holloway-Mason. Candace is Cookie's eldest sister. She is the mother of two children. She has maintained a distant relationship with Cookie since Cookie began dating Lucious.

Malcolm DeVeaux. Malcolm is the head of security at Empire Entertainment and Cookie's love interest in season 1.

Roxanne Ford. Roxanne is the prosecutor on the Bunkie Williams' murder case, and she is determined to bring Lucious Lyon down for a crime she believes he committed.

Bunkie Williams. Bunkie is Cookie's favorite cousin. He is murdered by Lucious in season 1.

APPENDIX B:

Episode List

Appendix B

Episode List

This list contains a brief description of each episode in *Empire* seasons 1, 2, and 3 ("Empire - TV Series - Episode List," 2018).

Season 1, Episode 1. Lucious Lyon, told he has a terminal illness, needs one of his family members to step up and take over his company. Meanwhile his ex-wife, Cookie, is recently released from prison and wants half of the company.

Season 1, Episode 2. Lucious has to defend Empire's IPO launch after one of his artists is involved in a shooting.

Season 1, Episode 3. Lucious learns that someone witnessed Bunkie's murder. Cookie seeks help from an old friend, and another woman causes tension between Hakeem and his girlfriend, Tiana.

Season 1, Episode 4. Lucious tries to steal a major artist from his rival. Jamal works on composing original music, and Hakeem faces complications in the lead up to an important performance.

Season 1, Episode 5. Cookie receives an anonymous gift she suspects may be a veiled threat from a person from her past. Lucious takes over Hakeem's first music video.

Season 1, Episode 6. Vernon, Lucious' friend and Empire Entertainment chairman, finds out Lucious killed Bunkie, and he helps Lucious to cover it up. Jamal's ambition causes trouble in his romantic relationship.

Season 1, Episode 7. Lucious tries to brand Empire Entertainment as a family-run company. Anika and Cookie both plot to run Empire

Season 1, Episode 8. Cookie and Camilla face off over Hakeem. Anika finds out Lucious slept with Cookie. Jamal reveals that he is gay by performing a remix of his father's song. Andre attempts suicide.

Season 1, Episode 9. Cookie uncovers Anika's secret that she is conspiring with a rival music mogul; Lucious must face his rival; the Lyon sons take drastic measures to help their father.

Season 1, Episode 10. Andre starts a musical relationship with his therapist Michelle, as he deals with bipolar disorder.

Season 1, Episode 11. Jamal and Lucious work toward a music-centered relationship, but Lucious learns he does not have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), but myasthenia gravis (MG).

Season 1, Episode 12. As the time comes for the Empire stock launch and the celebratory tribute concert, Lucious picks Jamal as his successor. Lucious is arrested for Bunkie's murder. Hakeem, Anika, Andre, and Cookie plan a hostile takeover.

Season 2, Episode 1. Three months after his arrest, Lucious tries to run Empire Entertainment while in federal lockup. Cookie stages a star-studded concert in support of Lucious while Andre, Hakeem, Anika and Mimi Whiteman attempt a hostile takeover.

Season 2, Episode 2. Cookie and her cohorts decide to start their own small record label, but it's off to a bumpy start as everyone has different visions for the new label. As his first project for the new company, Hakeem decides to form a girl group and woos a Latina lead singer, proving that he can be more than just an artist.

Season 2, Episode 3. Cookie and Anika work together behind Lucious' back to pull off a surprise performance that catches the eye of Pitbull. Meanwhile, Lucious

tracks down Frank Gathers' daughter to try to convince her to sign with him at Empire, while Hakeem is hard at work on his girl group, Mirage a Trois. Also, Andre and Rhonda hope their baby-on-the-way will be the key that unlocks Lucious' cold heart and opens the door for Andre to return to the Empire fold.

Season 2, Episode 4. Despite their feud, the Lyons decide to collaborate on a music project that will benefit both companies. Lucious wants to make Vernon disappear, so he won't testify against him.

Season 2, Episode 5. Cookie and Anika work with Laz to throw an event to launch their company, showcase their artists, and premiere a song written by Hakeem. Jamal works on his music with Ne-Yo; Hakeem begins a relationship with the lead singer of his new girl group. Andre finds salvation to rid himself of his past sins.

Season 2, Episode 6. Cookie and Lucious have to work together to protect their children and keep them away from danger. Jamal wants to get back into the studio and away from the role of CEO. Andre discovers a music artist with the same religious beliefs as him.

Season 2, Episode 7. Lucious considers a partnership with Jago, the founder of a streaming music company. Andre must achieve a delicate balance between his new values and his career. Hakeem tries to turn Laura, his girlfriend, into a star.

Season 2, Episode 8. Lucious releases a rap by Freda, which causes Hakeem to issue a rap-battle challenge. Cookie's sister Candace visits. Jamal tries to land a big sponsorship deal. Anika finds out she is pregnant with Hakeem's baby.

Season 2, Episode 9. A former prison mate helps Cookie and her sister Candace find their youngest sister, Carol. A deep connection forms when Jamal works with a critically acclaimed pop star. Cookie makes a discovery about her love interest Laz.

Season 2, Episode 10. Lucious makes a reckless move to purchase a streaming company. Cookie plans a concert at the prison where she was incarcerated for 17 years.

Season 2, Episode 11. Lucious declares he will do anything to regain his power, after losing control of the company. But Cookie has her own ideas of how to take the company back. Andre and Rhonda deal with losing their baby.

Season 2, Episode 12. Camilla sinks her claws into Hakeem, the acting Empire CEO, while the rest of the Lyon family members try to get him back on their side. Jamal gets backlash from his fans. Rhonda and Andre's marriage is tested.

Season 2, Episode 13. Tensions rise between Lucious and his sons. Lucious recreates a traumatic interaction with his mother for a new music video. Tiana and Laura fight to be spotlighted during the Mirage a Trois tour.

Season 2, Episode 14. Lucious releases his video and tries to maneuver his way back into the CEO position at Empire. Andre learns about his grandmother's mental illness as a way to better understand his own struggle. Anika tells the Lyon family she is pregnant.

Season 2, Episode 15. Lucious holds a fundraiser as part of a campaign to prove he should return as Empire's CEO. Hakeem considers whether or not to be a father to Anika's child.

Season 2, Episode 16. The discovery of a dark secret throws a wrench into Lucious' deeply personal music video about his mother. It is revealed that his mother is

still alive. Secret affairs compromise Hakeem and Jamal; Rhonda thinks she knows the identity of the attacker that pushed her down the stairs and caused her to lose her baby.

Season 2, Episode 17. Hakeem struggles to find a place for his fiancé, Laura, in his career and family. Cookie reveals the truth about Freda's father to Jamal. Jamal jumps in front of a bullet to protect Lucious.

Season 2, Episode 18. After a life-changing experience, Jamal refuses to make music until his family ends its seemingly endless cycle of violence and fighting. Meanwhile, the Feds are tailing Anika because they want to force her to testify against Lucious. In order to protect her family, Cookie organizes a meeting at Hakeem and Laura's wedding with various people from her and Lucious' past.

Season 3, Episode 1. Hakeem leaves the altar, and a rooftop fight between Anika and Rhonda leads to a tragic fall. Rhonda dies. Lucious uses his streaming service to pursue his music legacy and clashes with Tariq, who leads a federal task force to investigate him.

Season 3, Episode 2. Jamal partners with Angelo DuBois to host a summit for gun violence awareness. Lucious tries to win over Cookie. Hakeem and Shine start to record new songs together. Andre gets into trouble with the police.

Season 3, Episode 3. Cookie asks superstar Kitty to record a new song with Jamal, in hopes of helping him regain his ability to perform. Andre is falsely accused of assaulting a police officer. Hakeem and Gram, a rival artist, vie for Tiana's attention.

Season 3, Episode 4. Lucious starts seeing Angelo as a threat. Jamal takes his first big step towards recovery and faces Freda Gatz. Hakeem starts to have feelings for Nessa.

Season 3, Episode 5. Lucious and Andre are on alert waiting for Shine to retaliate after their latest meeting. Jamal teams up with Hakeem for a performance. Cookie is caught off-guard during a routine meeting with her probation officer.

Season 3, Episode 6. When Empire is hacked, the leak creates feuds between the artists and among the Lyon family. Andre tries to prove his worth to the company. Lucious is determined to divide Cookie and Angelo. Jamal is caught in a love triangle.

Season 3, Episode 7. Cookie needs to plan a family dinner that will impress Angelo's mother. Home videos push Cookie to confront secrets about her relationship with her father. Andre puts together a surprising duet.

Season 3, Episode 8. Andre sabotages Tiana's big appearance at a fashion event in an attempt to get Nessa into the spotlight. Meanwhile, Tariq works with Leah, Lucious' mom, to try to bring down Lucious. Jamal works with Philip, his friend, to get over his PTSD.

Season 3, Episode 9. Cookie hosts a free park concert to help Angelo appeal to the masses and win his bid to become mayor; the FBI continues its investigation of Lucious and freezes Empire's assets.

Season 3, Episode 10. Lucious announces his new music project, Inferno. Cookie vows to dethrone him, igniting an epic battle. Jamal befriends a fellow musician that's in rehab. Hakeem and Tiana fight Nessa for a spot in a music showcase.

Season 3, Episode 11. Cookie tries to move forward with Angelo while struggling with guilt over her run-in with Lucious. Leah looks for Tariq's help in taking down Anika. Jamal and Tory team up in the studio.

Season 3, Episode 12. Hakeem's birthday–the big 21–didn't stay big as long as expected. Andre tries his best to create opportunities for Nessa. Lucious tries to teach Hakeem a lesson. Jamal has issues choosing between his two lovers.

Season 3, Episode 13. Empire faces an expensive lawsuit after a physical attack on a woman at Hakeem's birthday party. Lucious becomes ill and Andre reveals his plans for Empire's Vegas venture. Angelo and Cookie watch the election results.

Season 3, Episode 14. Lucious receives news from Cookie that Angelo plans to propose. Giuliana, Lucious' newest love interest, convinces Lucious to go along with her plans.

Season 3, Episode 15. Angelo questions his decisions when his relationship with Cookie turns sour and they break up.

Season 3, Episode 16. The Lyons fear that the Dubois family is to blame for their latest family crisis, the kidnapping of Hakeem's daughter Bella. When no one is willing to give up any information, Cookie takes matters into her own hands. Jamal and Lucious reach a breakthrough in a song on which they have been working, and Andre lashes out. Meanwhile, Cookie sets her eyes on a new plan for Empire in Vegas.

Season 3, Episode 17. When Cookie is banned from Leviticus Vegas, she pulls together a team of her own allies to seek revenge on Giuliana and steal her secret weapon. Meanwhile, Jamal is encouraged to put his album on hold, so as not to compete with Lucious' "Inferno."

Season 3, Episode 18. As Lucious gets ready to launch Empire Las Vegas with Giuliana at his side, Cookie pulls together her own team of allies to wreak havoc on the opening. Lucious reveals his relationship with Guliana was a hoax and that he is in love

with Cookie. Andre is asked to run Empire. Lucious falls into a coma after a car bomb explodes.